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## **Football barriers – Aboriginal under-representation and disconnection from the ‘world game’**

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Indigenous Australians have had some great successes in Australian football and rugby. However, this success has not been mirrored in the ‘world game’, soccer. This study examines the reasons for such under-representation in Australia. The barriers to access to soccer were a combination of racist government policy which restricted the movement of Aboriginal people, and thus their opportunities to engage with a game that was not located near the isolated reserves in which they were held. The most successful Aboriginal players were fortunate that their circumstances placed them in close proximity to locales that were soccer strongholds. Moreover, the multicultural environment of post-Second World War Australian soccer provided these players a haven from the prejudice and racism of wider Australian society. The fact that soccer itself faced obstacles of acceptance in mainstream Australian sporting culture also impeded an Aboriginal presence. However, in recent years, several players have broken through to play in the national league and gain national representative honours.

### **Introduction**

Australian Aboriginal achievement in football – Australian Football (AFL), Rugby League and Rugby Union – is well documented, but achievement in the ‘world game’, soccer, has been largely missed. However, Aboriginal players like Charles Perkins, John Moriarty, Gordon Briscoe and Harry Williams did scale heady heights in Australian soccer. The multicultural environment of post-Second World War Australian soccer may have offered these players a haven from the prejudice and racism of wider Australian society. Nevertheless, an Aboriginal presence in the ‘world game’ has been one of great under-representation. More than 30 years ago, noted soccer historian the late Sid Grant was able to express with some authority that Aboriginal players had ‘excelled in the junior ranks especially in the Northern Territory, but the instinctively fast reflexes and speed of our native people has been largely unexploited in soccer’.<sup>1</sup>

The question needs to be raised: why have Aboriginal players not taken a greater role in Australian soccer? Unquestionably, Aboriginal players historically were ignored by the soccer authorities. But prior to the 1960s they suffered a similar fate with the other codes and sports as well.

Racial factors were undoubtedly reasons why so few Aborigines played in any of the major football codes before World War II. Although Australian football and rugby were immensely popular by the turn of the century, and rugby league grew rapidly after 1907,

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(Sir) Doug Nicholls (1906–88) was one of the few to play in top ranks of football. After he was initially rejected on racial grounds at Carlton in the VFL – they said he smelled.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding soccer, it is important to realize that most Aboriginal people lived in areas where the sport was largely unknown. The fact that soccer has faced obstacles of acceptance in mainstream Australian sporting culture may also have impeded an Indigenous presence. Soccer in Australia in the later nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century gained a foothold primarily in areas where there were large numbers of British miners. From the 1950s, its bases of support were located in centres with significant European migrant communities. In both instances, these were typically urban locations. In contrast Aboriginal people had no access to these soccer strongholds, as from the latter stages of the nineteenth century they had been segregated away from wider Australian society and placed under tight government control.

Certainly the other football codes, Australian Football League (AFL), Rugby League and Rugby Union, have since the 1960s recognized and lifted barriers that prevented the potential of indigenous players breaking through. These other codes established connections with and within indigenous communities. The AFL in particular has established training and coaching programmes targeting indigenous communities, with profitable returns. In the past three decades some of the greatest AFL players of all-time have been indigenous players. Some commentators feel similar results could be achieved in the round-ball code. 'Judging by the way they play Aussie rules, indigenous footballers might be capable of similar miracles on the soccer pitch.'<sup>3</sup> Certainly the late great 'Socceroo' captain Johnny Warren had no hesitation in stating that, in the past, 'the authorities including the Australian Soccer Federation were negligent in seeing the potential that lies within Aboriginal communities not addressed'.<sup>4</sup>

### **Traditional culture and sport**

In the wake of the horrific impact of British occupation in 1788, Aboriginal people and culture suffered decimation of catastrophic proportions. Some social commentators with a conscience noted the terror inflicted upon the Indigenous population:

We have not only taken possession of the lands of the aboriginal tribes of this colony, and driven them from their territories, but we have also kept up unrelenting hostility towards them, as if they were not worthy of being classed with human beings, but simply regarded as inferior to some of the lower animals of creation.<sup>5</sup>

The injustice of these actions prompted some to recommend action to absolve guilt: 'Their doom is sealed, and all that the civilised man can do ... is to take care that the closing hour shall not be hurried on by want, caused by culpable neglect on his part'.<sup>6</sup>

The avenue of sport would offer Aboriginal people some hope of acceptance, understanding and survival. In the contemporary twenty-first century Aboriginal people are regarded as having extraordinary gifts as sportsmen and sportswomen across a wide range of sporting endeavours particularly football, boxing and athletics. It certainly took Aboriginal Australians some time to gain not only acceptance on the sporting arena but even the right to take part.

Aboriginal Australia had developed a sporting culture long before European arrival on the Australian continent. Arguments have raged that in fact Aboriginal people were the original inventors of a form of Australian Football. Writer Jim Poulter

has recognized, 'the Gunditjmara tribe played a game called *marn gook*, or "game ball". A ball was made of possum skin and filled with pounded charcoal and bound with kangaroo sinews. Between 50 and 100 men a side played for possession for hours on end.'<sup>7</sup>

Early settler accounts of the 1840s testify that this game was predominately a kicking game.<sup>8</sup> The Aboriginal players apparently kicked 'the ball with the instep of the bare foot, and they made strong leaps – sometimes reaching 5 feet above the ground'.<sup>9</sup> An early pioneer scientist who explored the Murray River region near Mildura in Victoria's northwest corner also noted an Aboriginal ball game in 1857. William Blandowski described 'watching the Yerre Yerre people now known as the Nyeri Nyeri, playing a kicking ball game at Mondellimin, near present day Merbein'.<sup>10</sup> Blandowski's notes were later etched by artist Gustav Murtzel:

'A group of children is playing with a ball', the notes say. 'The ball is made out of Typha roots (roots of the bulrush that would have been growing alongside the Murray); it is not thrown or hit with a bat, but it is kicked up in the air with the foot. Aim of the game never let the ball touch the ground.'<sup>11</sup>

Predominantly though, traditional Aboriginal games were all about teaching skills, particularly agility and athleticism, which were integral in the hunting and gathering lifestyle. All games were taught and encouraged from a very young age to teach skills that were so important for survival. Social behaviourist Desmond Morris reflected 'our early hunting ancestors became gradually more athletic' and using 'these advantages and working together as a team – a hunting pack – they were able to plan strategies, devise tactics, take risks, set traps and, finally, aim to kill. Already, you will admit, they are beginning to sound like the perfect prototype for a soccer team.'<sup>12</sup>

### A sporting introduction

Prior to the 1850s Aboriginal people had little connection with organized sport. However Christian humanitarians and those with a benevolent directive encouraged Aboriginal sporting participation as a paternalistic means of civilizing Aboriginal people.<sup>13</sup> In these early years horse racing and cricket were the most prominent arenas of sporting outlet. There were a number of prominent Aboriginal jockeys, including the brilliant Peter St Albans, who as a 13-year-old rode Briseis to win Australia's greatest race, the Melbourne Cup, in 1876.<sup>14</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century it was noted that good numbers of Aboriginal people played cricket on missions, reserves and country stock stations: 'Rev. Mathew Hale, who established a missionary institution at Poonindie, near Port Lincoln in South Australia in 1850, believed that games and cricket in particular, could make Aborigines more industrious and moral.'<sup>15</sup>

One of the most significant sporting moments of this period was the highly successful Aboriginal cricket team that toured England in 1868. Without question the stars of this very good team were Johnny Mullagh and Johnny Cuzens. Mullagh was afforded the tag of the 'black W.G. [Grace]' and his statistics were impressive; in 'England he played 43 matches, scoring 1679 runs at an average of 22.5'.<sup>16</sup> Sadly by the turn of the century Aboriginal opportunities to play cricket and many other sports had declined.

While it is difficult to give precise reasons for declining Aboriginal involvement in cricket, it was undoubtedly related to a benign paternalism by a more pessimistic

institutionalized racism by the turn of the century. With greater segregation and less contact between Aborigines and Europeans at work, there were fewer opportunities and incentives for Aborigines to continue playing cricket.<sup>17</sup>

Placed under the strict control of government Protection Boards, Aboriginal people were largely segregated away from the wider community.

The need to protect Aborigines from the depredations of white society was overwhelming, and the ensuing legislation produced both legislative fences and the administrative decisions to physically locate Aborigines as far away as possible from whites. The exclusion of Aborigines from Australian society had begun in earnest.<sup>18</sup>

This was compounded 'with the general acceptance of Social Darwinism, which popularised racist views that Aborigines were an inferior race doomed to wither and disappear'.<sup>19</sup> As a result of this process many Aboriginal sportsmen and women, despite outstanding talent, were denied the greater recognition and representative opportunities they richly deserved.

### **Barriers to the 'world game'**

Australia, like many of the other colonial outposts, tried to create its own distinct national identity, declaring its independence of the mother country in many subtle forms. One area for promoting a strong independent national identity has been sport:

The precariousness of the dominions' English speaking populations made membership of the Empire a source of security and strength, and physically and culturally connected these far flung societies to the metropolis and the old world. On the other hand their very distance and increasing difference from Britain left them searching for an alternative and distinct identity. Sport – imperial sport – offered just the right combination of communality and difference, amity and enmity.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the fact that soccer had humble beginnings and was embedded in a working-class background, it did not take off in Britain's colonies to the same extent it did in other countries. In South Africa, until recent decades, cricket and rugby union held sway. But of course they were sports tied to the apartheid regimes of the past and soccer became the game of the majority black population: 'the more popular soccer became with the non-whites the more the whites looked down on it'.<sup>21</sup> Canada and the United States for their own reasons chose to make their own way with games like gridiron, basketball, baseball and ice hockey. New Zealand chose rugby union, or fell under its spell, from the late nineteenth century. In 1905 a touring all-conquering New Zealand All-Blacks side won 32 out of 33 matches in Britain.<sup>22</sup> Beating the mother country at anything was a moment of special significance and this played a part in establishing rugby union as New Zealand's game. By this time British soccer players were full-time professionals and there was a marked difference between them and the purely amateur teams that colonial countries could put on the field. Australia followed the pattern, with rugby league, rugby union and Australian football dominating the local scene. In 1901 with the Federation of Australian states into the Commonwealth of Australia, the country had at last cut the umbilical cord. Australian football chose the timing of this period to plant the nationalistic tone and direction of their code: 'In 1906 the Australasian Football Council chose to promote the code with the slogan "one flag, one destiny, one football

game”, and it was a game to be played with balls of only Australian manufacture and beneath an Australian flag at every stadium.<sup>23</sup>

From the late nineteenth century soccer in Australia did have strongholds in areas like Newcastle and the coalfields in NSW. Many famous teams in this region have records as long as some of England’s greatest clubs. But sporting opportunities for Aboriginal people during this period were extremely limited because of the restrictive segregated government policy of the day.

### Bondi Neal

Despite the severe handicap of many Aboriginal people being incarcerated on strict reserves and denied access to soccer, one outstanding individual overcame those obstacles, and his name was ‘Bondi’ Neal. He gained employment in the mines of the Hunter Valley coalfields, west of Newcastle in NSW. How he came to the area or escaped the restrictive government policy is unknown, but he would achieve local fame as an incredibly talented sportsman. Sid Grant recorded that: ‘A part Aboriginal Bondi Neal was a keen, versatile sportsman. He played senior cricket with Kurri, senior soccer with Kurri, Weston and Pelaw Main, and Rugby Union and Rugby League with Kurri ... He once threw a cricket ball 66 yards with both hands.’<sup>24</sup>

Despite his sporting versatility it was on the soccer pitch as an outstanding goalkeeper that Neal is best remembered. He was a member of the newly formed Pelaw Main team that was beaten by Broadmeadow in the 1904 Newcastle competition final 1–0.<sup>25</sup> During that 1904 season a large crowd of 400 people watched a fiercely fought local derby match between Pelaw Main and Heddon Greta. The match, which ended in a 2–2 draw, witnessed some exciting incidents, on and off the field:

Pelaw Main’s goalie Bondi Neil [*sic*] stopped two penalties. Thrice the referee, Harry Speers of Dudley, held up play as spectators crowded the visitor’s goalmouth while stones were aimed at the ‘keeper’. Play became heated in the final 20 minutes and fights broke out among partisan fans. Player Chris Picken, also a first grade Rugby Star, remarked, ‘I was glad to hear the final whistle’. Strange but true, referee Speers was cheered by both teams and many of the crowd. Years later, when living at Kurri Kurri, Harry remarked – ‘Yes, the strangest game I ever refereed. I gave a penalty to each side but when Neil fisted Picken’s drive over the bar pandemonium broke forth’.<sup>26</sup>

Three years later Pelaw Main and their richly talented goalkeeper overcome the disappointment of losing in 1904 when they won the 1907 final, beating the Wallsend Royals. The two leading teams fought out a thrilling final played at Broadmeadow showground: ‘It was an excellent game with the scores 2 all at 90 minutes. However in the extra time period, Pelaw Main excelled to win by 4 to 2 to take the first major soccer trophy to the coalfields.’<sup>27</sup>

Bondi Neal joined the Kurri Kurri club in 1908 and during the 1909 season his form was of such a high standard that he was selected as the representative goalkeeper for a combined Coalfields team that played against the visiting West Australian team at Maitland. He was undoubtedly the first Aboriginal player to gain representative honours as a soccer player. There was much anticipation in the local press of the visit of the West Australian team:

The Albion Ground has been engaged for the match. The local team comprises a fairly strong combination and a good game of soccer is sure to result. ‘Soccer’ is the predominant



game of Great Britain and is very fascinating. Those who have the opportunity should not fail to see this match.<sup>28</sup>

Over a thousand spectators packed into the ground for the game. Match reports in both the *Newcastle Morning Herald* and the *Maitland Mercury* clearly reveal that the West Australian team had by far the better of the match, winning two goals to nil. But the win would have been by a much greater margin but for the brilliance of Bondi Neal in goal. In the opening minutes he was 'called upon on two occasions to save, which he did brilliantly'. The local goalkeeper was certainly in the centre of the action: 'Neal relieved splendidly', 'Neal saved well' and 'West Australian halfback Roskam put in a warm shot but Neal saved splendidly'.<sup>29</sup>

Bondi Neal left Kurri and moved to Weston for the 1910 season and played two seasons with the Weston club. About 1912, Bondi left the coalfields and returned to his native South Coast region. Neal is certainly the most famous early Aboriginal soccer player and was unquestionably an incredible athlete. To this point there has been no further evidence of Bondi Neal that has come to light after his return to the South Coast. So whatever became of this legendary player has disappeared from both archival and memory sources. There are a number of contributing factors to explain Bondi Neal's rise as a great goalkeeper. He had somehow escaped the tight government restrictive reserve policy that ruled over the lives of the majority of Aboriginal people, and he gained employment in the mines in and around the Newcastle region of NSW, with its heavily populated British mining population, a renowned soccer stronghold. It would be over 40 years before another Aboriginal soccer player of prominence would burst upon the Australian soccer scene.

### The global impact of the world game

Charles Perkins, arguably the most charismatic and recognized Aboriginal political leader of the twentieth century, was an outstanding soccer player. Perkins was in fact one of three great Aboriginal soccer players of the period that included John Moriarty and Gordon Briscoe. These men followed near identical and connected paths to the top. Perkins was adamant that: 'Aboriginal Affairs and soccer have been my passions and where I could work out my problems through both of those two things ... Soccer was where I got my satisfaction, my fulfillment'.<sup>30</sup>

Charles Perkins was born at the Aboriginal reserve near Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. His parents were Arrente and Kalkadoon people. He was taken from his mother at the age of 10 and placed in St Francis Anglican Home at Semaphore, SA, founded two years earlier by Father Percy Smith for Aboriginal boys. The practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families and communities had horrific implications for literally thousands of Aboriginal people for many decades. However, for Perkins it was here, amongst many other Aboriginal boys that had been taken from their families including his cousin Gordon Briscoe, Johnny Moriarty, Vince Copley and Wally McCarthur, that he attended school and learned to play soccer.

Later after leaving the home and working in a variety of jobs Perkins enrolled as a student with the University of Sydney and was only the second Aboriginal person to graduate from an Australian university. In 1965, he led a group of students, emulating the US civil rights movement 'Freedom Rides'. The Australian 'Freedom Rides' will remain forever one of the pivotal moments in Aboriginal history, and it provided the perfect political and public launching pad for Charles Perkins. The students, in visiting



outback towns in New South Wales, used the media to draw attention to the deeply segregated inequality of Aboriginal existence. Aboriginal people were denied access to hotels, swimming pools and, in some cases, even the streets of these towns.

From that point and for the remainder of his life, Perkins was at the forefront of Aboriginal political activism. He played a role through the Foundation of Aboriginal Affairs in the campaign that led to the overwhelming 'yes' vote in the 1967 referendum, resulting in the federal government taking power over Aboriginal affairs from the states. Throughout his dynamic and often turbulent political career, Perkins was compared to such individuals as Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson Mandela. He died in 2000, leaving a void in Aboriginal political affairs that has been impossible to fill.

But it is the intersection and pivotal point of connection with other boys like Moriarty and Briscoe at the St Francis Home and their introduction to soccer that will be examined here. It was their acceptance not just onto the soccer field but into the wider cosmopolitan soccer community and international travel that played some part in moulding all three into inspiring Aboriginal political leaders in the decades ahead.

All of the boys were to feel the full brunt of racism and prejudice that was an everyday part of the Australian landscape during their young lives. Denied access to so much, Perkins' reflections clearly identify the pain he felt as a young man:

It really hurts you; it slices right to your heart. You can't handle it. I thought to myself, what have I done? How can I rectify this? Can I scrub myself white? Can I do something to myself? Nothing. They really make you feel ashamed of yourself and you feel less of a person as a consequence. It undermines your confidence above all else, and your dignity and your self-respect. Then it develops a reaction within yourself of hatred. It pierced me right to the core of my heart. I've never forgotten those things and I never will. You carry them to your grave. They're scars on your mind.<sup>31</sup>

Acceptance 'as an equal was a powerful panacea for Dr Perkins. To achieve that sense of equality, on an individual level as well as on behalf of his people, was the summation of his life's mission'.<sup>32</sup> It was something that made a great and lasting impact on Charles Perkins. Soccer was responsible for opening doors and delivering a glimpse of a level playing field. Perkins was adamant that: 'It brought me into the migrant community where I found great satisfaction, no prejudice, no history of bad relations, no embarrassing comments or derogatory remarks, they welcomed me into the fold and I've been there ever since.'<sup>33</sup>

The large influx of European migrants into Australia after the end of the Second World War had a marked impact on, and explosion of interest in, soccer. Clubs formed with a diverse variety of ethnic backgrounds including Polish, Italian, Greek, Hungarian, Croatian and Jewish to name but a few. Gordon Briscoe reflected on the impact of these arrivals:

when these 'New Australians' came onto the scene, they didn't question our background, because they were people who'd had difficulties, they'd suffered from war damage, they'd suffered from [not] having the freedom to move wherever they wanted to, they were probably being employed for the first time, struggling, but yet still wanting to practice their culture, which was soccer ... So when they saw us, they didn't question our background and our racial heritage ... and they respected us, because we could do the things that entertained them.<sup>34</sup>

Of course the migrant interest in the game had an Achilles heel. In the racist xenophobic Australia of post-Second World War the game was targeted and undermined.

As Johnny Warren aptly described it, soccer was branded as only a game fit for ‘wogs, sheilas and poofers’.<sup>35</sup> The mass media had a major role in this process as they had a vested interest in the other codes. As a consequence soccer was given little press coverage unless it could be portrayed in a negative light and as unAustralian.<sup>36</sup>

The games challenge to the hegemony of the dominant football codes alienated many who had long held these codes to be symbols of what it was to be Australian. Soccer’s strong immigrant element drew adverse reactions and ensured that the game received similar treatment from the Australian establishment as was meted out to immigrants in general.<sup>37</sup>

The vibrant migrant communities nevertheless worshipped the game and embraced their new homeland:

Football connected them to their homelands rather than to Britain. They created a football revival which, in the context of the narrow and provincial racism of mid-century Australia, only served to reinforce the minority status of football or, as it was derisively known, ‘wogball’. The entry of football into the Australian mainstream would only be possible when these new migrant communities had been allowed admission into ‘white Australia’ in the last quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup>

As such Aboriginal players and the migrant community were partners and victims of the entrenched Anglophone ‘White Australia’ policy. The football career of Charles Perkins:

commenced before the 1967 referendum moved to include Aborigines as part of the ‘official’ population of Australia. The axiom of ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ rang true and as such, both Charlie Perkins and non-English speaking migrants shared a common bond through the common enemy of racism.<sup>39</sup>

The launch of Perkins, Moriarty and Briscoe’s soccer careers could all be tied to a now-legendary minor soccer game played whilst they were at the St Francis Home. A state under-18 representative team was practicing on a football pitch close to the Home. All of the Aboriginal boys were sitting on a fence watching the team practice when an official came over and asked if the boys would like to form a team and play a practice match against the State team. The Aboriginal boys jumped at the chance. The officials had no idea that these boys were mad on sport and were excellent at any football code. John Moriarty recalled that at the Home:

We’d play during the holidays from eight o’clock in the morning, from after breakfast, right through till dark. Sometimes we’d even play in the moonlight; we were so full of energy. All we had to play soccer with was a tennis ball, but we’d play six, seven, eight, ten a side often in quite confined spaces in the courtyard at the home. That was good fun, learning to control the ball and so on.<sup>40</sup>

On the field the Aboriginal boys annihilated this representative team twelve to nil. There were a number of officials present from the Adelaide Port Thistle Soccer Club, and they immediately signed up a number of these budding stars. Perkins was a first grade soccer player at the age of 15, by the age of 21 he had moved to the most powerful club in South Australia at the time, Budapest. During this time period Budapest won a host of trophies and Perkins was awarded the South Australian Player of the Year award. John Moriarty, Gordon Briscoe and Vince Copley also initially joined

Port Thistle. Moriarty also made the first team before the age of 18. A number of the Aboriginal kids including Briscoe and Copley made the State intermediate team. Moriarty played for a number of clubs including International United, Birkalla and then back to Port Adelaide. Both Perkins and Moriarty made such an impact that they became regulars in the South Australian senior representative team.

On one interstate trip in 1960 Moriarty became aware that as an Aboriginal the soccer authorities had to gain permission from the Protector of Aborigines for him to travel with the team:

This is an insult, having to seek permission from someone I've never met. Who is this person who has control over my life? Being an independent minded person, and having just turned twenty-two, I thought I was representing the State in soccer in my own right, which was as an Australian. I thought, 'this is an indignity that no-one should suffer'.<sup>41</sup>

Charles Perkins meanwhile received an invitation from the English first division club Everton to go to England for a trial in 1959. Perkins was encouraged by friends to take the chance as it could only broaden his knowledge of 'world situations' and benefit him on his return to Australia.<sup>42</sup> Perkins was faced with enormous disadvantages when travelling. He set sail on an Italian liner in the cheapest class, with little money or clothes. The trip to Europe was a nightmare, he suffered severe seasickness and ate little. He disembarked in Genoa and took a train to Paris where his bag was stolen. He arrived in London unshaven, with only the clothes on his back and must have resembled a tramp to the Everton officials there to meet him. He was given only two weeks to get himself into shape for his trial and received no encouragement from either the players or officials. Understandably the trial did not go well. Disheartened and lonely for home, he often walked the Liverpool streets at night. He gained employment at the Mersey shipyards as a fitter, but racism there forced him to look elsewhere. He gained a job as a coalminer in Wigan and lived with a former friend from the St Francis home, Wally McArthur, who was now a world class rugby league player. The mining community had no problem accepting Perkins as one of their own. He was given a football opportunity with Bishop Auckland, then regarded as the best amateur team in Britain. He was an outstanding success and, now fully fit and acclimatized, his performances warranted the notice of some first division clubs, including one offer of a trial by the legendary Matt Busby and Manchester United. Perkins, now suffering acute homesickness, turned down the offer and accepted a paid return ticket to Australia by the Croatia club back in Adelaide. Despite the negativity of his initial disappointments in Britain he could at the conclusion of his stay reflect:

I've had a good time here. I've seen a lot of things, met a lot of people and found a lot of happiness. The English people in Wigan and Bishop Auckland or England generally, I suppose, are wonderful. They are decent people and give you a fair go. They treated me better than I was ever treated in Australia ... I was on my way back to my country, my people and problems.<sup>43</sup>

He encouraged his cousin Gordon Briscoe to join him with the Adelaide Croatia club. Initially Briscoe had played with Beograd and Polonia after leaving Port Adelaide but had moved to the country through work and had continued to play soccer in Port Lincoln where he had represented that district in both soccer and Australian Football. Perkins and Briscoe had a great season with Croatia winning the Ampol Cup, and Perkins was back in the South Australian representative side.

Meanwhile John Moriarty achieved a wonderful milestone at the conclusion of the 1960 state championships in Melbourne, where his performances were of such a level that he gained selection in the Australian side to tour South East Asia. He was the first Aboriginal selected to play soccer for his country. Sadly, he would be denied the opportunity. Australia was expelled by the world governing body FIFA for poaching players from European clubs without paying for them. The ban lasted nearly two years and sadly Moriarty would not be given the opportunity again:

None of this changed the fact that I'd been picked to represent my country. I was on top of the world. I really felt I'd earned my place and I was walking on air. Of course, not getting to play was upsetting, but I was also still seething about needing permission to play soccer interstate. In fact, that was one of the things that brought me to the Aboriginal rights issues. And it did so at the beginning of a time of great activity.<sup>44</sup>

In 1961 Moriarty joined the Italian-supported Adelaide Juventus team; the perks were obvious: eating at fine Italian restaurants and wearing tailor-made Italian suits. Moriarty proved a great favourite with the Juventus fans. He had previously been approached about possible opportunities with English clubs Tottenham Hotspur, Arsenal and Everton, but a lack of financial resources had curtailed his ambitions. It was during this time period that Moriarty, along with Perkins, came into contact with a number of influential non-indigenous Aboriginal rights campaigners like Dr Charles Duguid and Don Dunstan who encouraged their involvement in Aboriginal affairs. Moriarty outlined, 'I started taking petitions around. Dunstan spurred us on, and we gained a lot of support, in the form of signatures and petitions, that were presented in the State Parliament.'<sup>45</sup>

Gordon Briscoe decided to follow the example of Charlie Perkins and travelled to England to further his football career. He started playing for an amateur team, Henal Rovers, just outside of London, but was spotted and signed by first division club Preston North End. Preston was a club with a proud past and also an Australian connection. Joe Marston spent five seasons with the club in the early 1950s, playing in a losing FA cup final in 1954. Briscoe during his stay more than held his own playing with the B and C teams, the reserves and made a couple of first team appearances. Famous England international Tom Finney was assistant coach at the time. Briscoe supported the comments of Perkins that in England he found great acceptance:

Well, they didn't know what an Aboriginal person was, and because of our background, we'd say, 'I'm an Aboriginal' ... and they'd say, 'Well what's that?', and then we'd have to explain our background. But, they treated you in the same European way, they were very self interested. And that's how we were able to get past some of the problems. If you could play soccer, amongst people who knew something about soccer, you were put on a pedestal ... if the coach said, 'You do this and you do that', and you did that, and then you did that well, you were given an opportunity to go further up the slippery pole.<sup>46</sup>

After returning to Australia his soccer career scaled down, and in 1971 he accepted a position as a field officer with the recently established Aboriginal Legal Service in Sydney. In the same year Briscoe and Shirley Smith established the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern and persuaded Fred Hollows to become its first medical Director. Hollows as Director and Briscoe as Assistant Director later cooperated in running the national trachoma and eye health programme. The programme had screened 110,000 people by 1981, when they resigned from it in protest against

Commonwealth government proposals to pass Aboriginal health funding to the states. In 1972 Briscoe attempted to enter federal parliament. As an Australia Party candidate, he unsuccessfully contested the NT seat in the House of Representatives against the sitting Country Party member, Sam Calder. Briscoe moved to Canberra in 1974, where he worked for the Commonwealth department of Health, Aboriginal Hostels Ltd, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress and AIATSIS. Briscoe went to university, gaining a Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts and PhD from the Australian National University. In 2004 in recognition of decades of work on behalf of his people he was awarded an Order of Australia.

In 1963 John Moriarty finally decided to join the European caravan and set sail for Europe with a group of friends. He made an error in timing. It had been his intention to break into European soccer, but he arrived in October: 'it was mid season and it was impossible to break into it'. He went on a European sojourn with his friends, visiting over 30 countries, but still carries disappointment over not pushing harder with his soccer opportunities:

One of my big regrets of that time is that I didn't settle with a soccer club. I just trained in Sweden. The truth is, I was really enjoying myself. I was twenty six and what really stuck out for me was meeting and mixing with people. I had always been told I was very narrow in outlook; that trip overseas broadened my outlook considerably ... Even so I regretted not playing soccer in England, or not giving it a go there. I lived with that for the rest of my life. I'll never know if I'd have made it.<sup>47</sup>

Moriarty was also forthright on the difference of attitude between the people in England and Australia at that time: 'They enjoyed life; they enjoyed people for what they were. If you were a likeable person, they didn't discriminate on colour – at least the people I met didn't. In Australia discrimination was enshrined in law.'<sup>48</sup>

After nine months of wonderful memories and travel Moriarty was called back to Australia to play for Adelaide Juventus in the Australian soccer championships, the club paying for his flight back to Australia. He arrived back in Adelaide on 11 June 1964 'and went straight from the airport to a Juventus home game, at Hanson Reserve. When I walked onto the ground the crowd forgot the game for a moment and turned to greet me. I'll never forget that welcome. People still mention that moment to me.'<sup>49</sup> In 1965 his soccer career was prematurely brought to an end in a savage collision with a goalkeeper. The force of the impact ripped one cartilage completely off; the one on the other side was half off. Surgery attempted to put his knee back together. After months of rehabilitation he made a comeback, lasting only two games before his knee once more gave out, ending what had been a great career.

One stellar career ended and another began. Moriarty was a foundation member of the local Aborigines Progressive Association and the South Australian branch of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). In 1967 he completed a Bachelor of Arts Degree in history and geography at Flinders University and in 1971 was awarded a Churchill Fellowship. He moved to Canberra in 1973 to take a position with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) and rose rapidly. In 1974 he served with several advisory groups and subsequently moved to Melbourne and Adelaide as a regional head. The following year he was appointed national chairperson of National Aborigines and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC). Moriarty left the DAA in 1988 to work as a private consultant in Aboriginal affairs to public and business agencies. He and his wife Ros also run design firms, Jumbana (Moriarty's Aboriginal name) and Balarinji, producing high-quality

fashion goods inspired by Aboriginal arts and crafts, most famously with the designs worn by Qantas staff and carried by a number of their elaborately decorated planes.

In 1963 Charles Perkins decided that Sydney was the place for him, and a university degree was high on his priority list: 'When I came to Sydney my deep interest in sport was transferred more to Aboriginal affairs. I realized that Sydney was the centre of the mass media and this was where I could get an opinion across to people in Australia.'<sup>50</sup> Perkins had hoped that soccer could pay his way through university and he trained with the Bankstown soccer club for a week, but was told he would not make the team. A fortunate meeting with an old soccer chum put him in touch with the wealthy Greek-backed club Pan Hellenic. He had a training session with the club and the following Sunday in a match against arch rivals Prague he was given a run in the second half. Perkins was never one to let an opportunity go begging. He had an outstanding debut scoring a second half hat-trick that sent the Greek fans mad with delight. He was an instant celebrity with the Greek community. Within three months he was captain of the club and in six months was captain coach. Perkins' goals and objectives were now fixed in sight: 'With my new status and the financial rewards it brought. I was now in a position to pursue my immediate objective of a university career, and beyond that, I hoped a revolution in race relations in Australia.'<sup>51</sup>

Perkins graduated from university. After so many years, soccer now took a back seat as Charles Perkins embarked with a group of students on the Freedom ride, and to Aboriginal political immortality. Johnny Warren had no hesitation in stating, 'Perkins was a champion – a real Ben Hur, smashing his way through Australia's race politics, and football was his first chariot.'<sup>52</sup> Charles Perkins, John Moriarty and Gordon Briscoe, against all odds made an indelible imprint on Australian soccer. Circumstances and place played a major part in their journey to the soccer pitch. Being taken from their families at a young age and placed in a boys' home in Adelaide in close proximity to a soccer playing area had a major part to play in their rise to prominence.

### **Harry Williams**

Interestingly, the inspirational exploits of Perkins, Moriarty and Briscoe did not play a part in the career choice of the man regarded by many as the greatest ever Aboriginal soccer player, Harry Williams. He was a lightning fast and extremely skilful fullback renowned for his electric overlapping runs down the line. Williams played in the all-conquering St George Budapest side of the early 1970s. This team bristled with international players such as Mike Denton, Adrian Alston, Johnny Warren, Manfred Schaffer, Mike Fraser and Allan Ainslie. St George was without doubt the glamour side of Australian soccer at the time and was coached by the tempestuous and brilliant Frank Arok. Harry Williams made 44 appearances for the Socceroos and will be forever remembered as a member of the Australian side that qualified for the 1974 World Cup Finals in Germany. William's rise was meteoric to say the least as he was selected to the national team after making only six first team appearances for St George. Immensely proud of his Aboriginal background he is adamant that his indigenous heritage was never an issue on the field: 'No one went about congratulating me because I was an Aboriginal soccer player.'<sup>53</sup> He was equally forthcoming in his thoughts on his own fortunate introduction to the game and the wider limited exposure of Aboriginal involvement:



The opportunity for indigenous Australians to play soccer was probably more limited. Most Aboriginal communities were introduced to league, union, AFL, boxing and to some degree basketball. I was exposed to soccer by a friend across the street at six years of age. For me, it was just a question of circumstances. It just happened. Maybe, it was fate, or maybe it was chance. In hindsight, maybe it could be called luck.<sup>54</sup>

Like the earlier Aboriginal soccer groundbreakers Perkins, Moriarty and Briscoe, Williams was also candid on the impact and connection with the migrant communities that he experienced:

I actually always felt at home with the migrant communities. We found common ground through the round ball, and the shared interest built up a great understanding. We were all soccer players, and it didn't matter where we were from. Soccer is a great leveller for that all over the world.<sup>55</sup>

After winning every honour available at club level with St George, Williams moved to Canberra City in 1977. He spent several seasons with the Canberra club playing in the National Soccer League. He had his last game at the age of 39 playing for Monaro in the ACT State league in 1990. He immediately began taking a more active role in Aboriginal affairs. He gained working opportunities within ATSIC (the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) working on social, economic and social justice issues and later as the Director of the Indigenous Services Unit, for ACT, Corrective Services. Through his work Williams had the good fortune to come into contact with the late Charles Perkins and acknowledged the long-lasting impression Perkins made upon him: 'Charlie loved to talk and was always on the go. He was a very good soccer player as well as politician, and did some great things for indigenous Australians. I am not exactly sure how I started doing the work I do, but while it is demanding, it can also be very rewarding and I enjoy it.'<sup>56</sup>

Williams has also taken on with a passion the development of young Indigenous soccer talent: 'I do have a tinge of disappointment that there haven't been more Aboriginal players that have made it through to national level ... I have seen so many Aboriginal kids with such tremendous talent, more talent than I ever had.'<sup>57</sup>

As a consequence he became the Ambassador for an initiative instigated by Soccer NSW to unearth and encourage indigenous soccer talent. The programme included conducting the inaugural Harry Williams Cup, which was held at Soccer NSW's Valentine Park, Parklea headquarters in early 2006. Williams was glowing from the success of this initial tournament: 'Some 19 teams participated including 5 Indigenous sides and some 80 plus young Indigenous players. We had 15 girls for the week, but due to the lack of numbers weren't able to organize a girl's comp, but rest assured that will happen next year.'<sup>58</sup> Williams is committed to the cause and is hoping to attract corporate funding to support indigenous junior soccer development.

### **The awakening of the 'sleeping giant'**

In the last five years soccer has made incredible progress into the mainstream of Australian sporting culture. With the formation of Football Federation Australia and the backing, support and direction of business tycoon Frank Lowey, the leap forward has been beyond imagination. The appointment of CEO John O'Neil was a master-stroke and he initially presided over the formation of the now highly successful national competition, the Hyundai A-League, and the acceptance of Australia into the



thriving Asian Confederation. But the qualification of the Socceroos into the 2006 World Cup Finals in Germany catapulted the Australian team onto the world stage and into the Australian public's imagination. Under the guidance of Dutch coaching wizard Guus Hiddinck Australia's performances at the World Cup against Japan, Brazil, Croatia and Italy were outstanding and gripped the public's heart like never before.

The once formidable barriers to the game have begun to crumble at the foundations and even the staunchest of supporters and commentators of other codes now recognize that trying to hold back the march of soccer will be like trying to hold back a tsunami. After Australia defeated Uruguay to qualify for the 2006 World Cup finals noted historian Geoffrey Blainey, himself a great follower of AFL and author of *A Game of Our Own*, recognized the changing landscape:

Like thousands of others who admire Australian rules football, I watched the remarkable end of the soccer game in Sydney with split feelings ... People brought up in Victoria – or in the three other strongholds of Aussie rules – have long sensed the fierce competition that soccer would some day give our game.

If Australia's national soccer team performs well in the World Cup and goes on to win a fairly regular place in subsequent contests, the publicity for soccer here will be voluminous. Australian soccer then will probably attract more money than Aussie rules, and will increasingly recruit those talented youngsters who are mad about sport and have the natural football skills that both codes require.

All this – if it comes to pass – will be to soccer's credit. But the spectacular game of our own, with its rich traditions could well be the loser.<sup>59</sup>

Marching hand in hand with this progressive and exciting development of the game at all levels has been a heightened indigenous presence. In the past several years a burgeoning group of indigenous players have broken through to play in the national league and gain national representative honours. Players like Jade North, Travis Dodd, Freddy Agius, Kasey Wehmann, Tajh Minniecon, David Williams and Morgan Cawley have made this important inroad. In late 2006 both North and Dodd were members of a Socceroo team that defeated Kuwait two nil in Sydney in an Asian Cup qualifier. John Moriarty was certainly uplifted by the moment and saw the potential for the future, hailing it as the 'great breakthrough':

They're both fantastic footballers and they're great role models. I mean what more can you ask for? Playing for the Socceroos and putting on performances like they have. We can get many more Jade Norths and Travis Dodds into the national team. It's an old dream. If you can get an Australian team peppered with Aboriginal players, think of how well we could do ... it's the ideal sport for Aboriginal people. Their bone structure. Their coordination, hands, feet, eye. They've got speed and dexterity. They're naturals, but we haven't tapped into it all.<sup>60</sup>

Of equal importance was the recognition by the indigenous players at this level of the crucial role they have to play:

The way the game is progressing, with the spotlight we have now, hopefully we can be role models for Aboriginal kids.

There just hasn't been that next step for kids to go before. AFL is in their face, so is rugby league. But now we're making some way on this. With the Socceroos, you do get

noticed more – kids can see that. It's such a big stage. To do what we're doing in front of so many people, it gives kids something to aspire to. People stand up and listen to what you've got to say. I can have an influence now.<sup>61</sup>

This rise in indigenous participation has been noted at all levels and informed commentators have remarked on this remarkable trend and the unease of the once dominant other codes:

Australia's 'traditional' football codes – Australian football and the two rugby codes – have long had their pick of the country's most promising indigenous athletes.

But this looks set to change with soccer finally waking up to the potential offered by the most athletic Aboriginal players – both boys and girls.

The growth in talent has been tremendous and there has been a real spike on the participation graph. At national championship level in soccer this year, 24 Indigenous youngsters were involved. In Australian football, there were 61, so that's still in front, but soccer has already outstripped rugby league, where there were 15.<sup>62</sup>

Outreach programmes to indigenous communities have begun in earnest. John Moriarty was quick to secure the support of Macarthur River Mines in the Gulf of Carpentaria to support a number of soccer clinics near his home town of Boorooloola. Travis Dodd, supported by former Socceroos John Kosmina, Alex Tobin and Craig Foster, all lent their time and support to the programme.<sup>63</sup> Former Socceroo star and national coach Frank Farina joined this exodus to a remote location with the backing of Football Federation Australia:

Farina went round the remote territories in the outback of Queensland earlier this year visiting some of them ... The FFA is donating old kits to the remote communities to help them. The game is free flowing and oozes the exuberance and improvisation that young Indigenous kids love and are attracted to.<sup>64</sup>

That investment can only enhance the long-term future of the game in Australia. John Moriarty reflected that this commitment needs to be well planned and orchestrated from the highest levels of the game: 'It needs to be linked with the FFA so it's not done in isolation. We can't go on like we did with the old system. The FFA needs to be involved in a detailed structured way, to reach out to Aboriginal kids and bring them into football. It's long overdue, and I'd be happy to be involved.'<sup>65</sup>

The neglect of the soccer bodies of the past as highlighted by Johnny Warren can be finally laid to rest. Long term strategies and programmes are underway or in development.

The national body, which finally has the resources to introduce meaningful Indigenous programs, hears the call loud and clear. 'We've lagged behind the other sports in this area, and we know we have a lot of catching up to do', said (former) FFA Chief Executive John O'Neil. 'But we are committed to doing a lot more. We've now got some federal Government funding for Indigenous programs and we intend to do something about it.'<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

Aboriginal involvement with soccer has historically been one of denied access. The barriers to the game were undoubtedly a combination of government policy which

severely restricted the movement of Aboriginal people and therefore their opportunities to connect with a game that was not located near the isolated reserves upon which they were incarcerated. Additionally there were barriers and hurdles placed before any Aboriginal participation in sport from the later stages of the nineteenth century which largely remained in place until the 1960s. The noted successful Aboriginal soccer players, like Bondi Neal, Charles Perkins, John Moriarty, Gordon Briscoe and Harry Williams, were fortunate in that circumstances placed them within localities that were soccer strongholds. The acceptance that these Aboriginal players found within the migrant communities had a profound impact upon their life directives and outlook. The multicultural environment of post-Second World War Australian soccer did provide these players with a haven from the prejudice and racism of wider Australian society. Like the Bob Dylan classic, for soccer and Aboriginal involvement, the 'times are a' changin'. Aboriginal initiatives like those instigated by Harry Williams and John Moriarty are now being supported by NSW Soccer and Football Federation Australia. The current crop of Australian Socceroos and Olyroos like Travis Dodd, Jade North, Kasey Wehrmann and David Williams are the advance party of what will undoubtedly prove to be an avalanche of outstanding Indigenous players of the future.

## Notes

1. Grant, *Jack Pollard's Soccer Records*, 11.
2. Cashman, *Paradise of Sport*, 142.
3. T. Lane, 'Aboriginal Players Could Take the Game Further'. *The Age*, November 19, 2005.
4. Personal correspondence with Johnny Warren, July 14, 2004.
5. Chase and Von Sturmer, "'Mental Man'", 7.
6. *Newcastle Chronicle*, November 13, 1869.
7. Booth and Tatz, *One Eyed*, 10; J. Poulter, *The Age*, June 8, 1993.
8. Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round*, 8.
9. G. Blainey, 'Why I Fear for Our Own Beautiful Game'. *The Age*, November 19, 2003, 95–6.
10. S. Rintoul, 'Aussie Rules Originally Aboriginal, Etching Shows'. *The Australian*, September 22–23, 2007, 3.
11. Ibid.
12. Morris, *The Soccer Tribe*, 10.
13. Cashman, *Paradise of Sport*, 132.
14. Maynard, *Aboriginal Stars of the Turf*, 28.
15. Cashman, *Paradise of Sport*, 132.
16. Whimpress, 'Johnny Mullagh', 98.
17. Cashman, *Paradise of Sport*, 135.
18. Booth and Tatz, *One Eyed*, 44.
19. Ibid.
20. Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round*, 88.
21. Murray, *The World Game*, 18.
22. Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round*, 90.
23. Ibid., 92.
24. Grant, *The History of Coalfields Soccer*, 137.
25. Hetherington, *History of Soccer*.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. 'British Association Football', *Maitland Mercury*, May 5, 1909.
29. 'Soccer Football', *Maitland Mercury*, May 12, 1909.
30. Charles Perkins, video interview, 5 May 1998. Personal possession Eileen Perkins, Australian Biography VII (cameraroll2).
31. Read, *Charles Perkins*, 48.
32. Warren, *Sheilas, Wogs and Poofers*, xix–xx.
33. Charles Perkins, video interview, 5 May 1998.

34. Author interview with Gordon Briscoe, Canberra, October 7, 2004.
35. Warren, *Sheilas, Wogs and Poofers*.
36. Mosley *et al.*, *Sporting Immigrants*, 168–9; Warren, *Sheilas, Wogs and Poofers*, xxiv–xxv.
37. Mosley *et al.*, *Sporting Immigrants*, 168.
38. Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round*, 95.
39. Warren, *Sheilas, Wogs and Poofers*, xix.
40. Moriarty, *Saltwater Fella*, 105.
41. Ibid.
42. Perkins, *A Bastard Like Me*, 51.
43. Ibid., 41.
44. Moriarty, *Saltwater Fella*, 118.
45. Ibid.
46. Author interview with Gordon Briscoe.
47. Moriarty, *Saltwater Fella*, 136, 137, 138.
48. Ibid., 137.
49. Ibid., 138.
50. Perkins, *A Bastard Like Me*, 68.
51. Ibid., 66.
52. Warren, *Sheilas, Wogs and Poofers*, xx.
53. Wallace, *Our Socceroos*, 70.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 72.
57. *Indigenous Times*, November 2, 2005.
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59. Blainey, 'Why I Fear for Our Own Beautiful Game'.
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61. Ibid.
62. M. Lynch, 'Game Woos Aborigines'. *The Sunday Age*, December 19, 2004, Sport section, 14.
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